

## ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** November 20, 2014 Conference Call

**Agenda Item:** Bighorn Sheep Transplant Areas

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Endorsement to Proceed

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 15 minutes

### **Background**

During the October and November meetings the Commission approved FWP to move up to 50 bighorn sheep from HD 482 with the option of capturing a few sheep (<10) across the river in HD 680 if necessary to complete a capture goal. However, it was not agreed upon as to where to put them.

FWP continues to look for areas to establish a new sheep herd but is repeatedly foiled by inadequate habitat, a lack of adequate public access for hunting, the proximity of domestic sheep and/or goats, and the threat of establishing a disease vector to a healthy herd in the event of an outbreak. Currently we have no suitable places to establish a new population. Even if such a place were identified this year the necessary groundwork of habitat analysis, landowner contacts, the Environmental Analysis (EA), etc. have not been done, and that process takes a year or more.

Current Commission policy disallows sending sheep out-of-state. Therefore, we must find a place in an existing Montana herd to put the captured sheep. Augmentation can be an important bighorn management tool, but currently there are no herds in-state where a transplant of additional sheep is biologically desirable. Some herds that have experienced a recent die-off have been mentioned as possible candidates. However, bringing in sheep from another area, regardless of genetic similarities, will risk not only to the suppressed herd because of the potential for new and/or different pathogens or strains of pathogens, but also a risk for the transplanted sheep because of ongoing problems with poor lamb recruitment and disease transmission from the receiving herd. Moreover, we have experience with several herds in the state – Kootenai Falls, Berray Mountain, the Highlands, and the Beartooth WMA – where repeated transplants of additional sheep have not benefitted the herd. We need to be careful in placing sheep somewhere in the state just because we feel like we have to. FWP sees this as neither wise nor prudent bighorn management. As stated in the Conservation Strategy (p.42), “The protection of the integrity and health of existing populations and metapopulations has to be the first priority in management of bighorn sheep....”

In these types of circumstances FWP sees moving sheep out-of-state as the best option because it eliminates the overpopulation problem in the donor herd, can be an overall benefit to bighorns in North America by helping another state, does not compromise another existing herd in Montana, and saves us money because the receiving state pays for the capture, testing, handling and transport of the sheep, which can be expensive. The money Montana saves can then be put to use in-state for searching for and evaluating potential transplant options, habitat acquisition or improvement, survey and inventory, research, or any number of other beneficial projects.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

There is opportunity for public input during the Commission meeting by conference call set up at the Helena Headquarters and at the Regional offices.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

At this time, FWP seeks Commission endorsement to move bighorns to area or areas as determined during the conference call.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move the F&W Commission endorse FWP being able to move bighorns to area or areas as determined during the conference call.